

Narrative Strategies in Gloria Naylor's Novels

Dr. Mahmoud Refaat Mahmoud<sup>(\*)</sup>

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Gloria Naylor is a writer who takes care of the form of her writings, as well as the content. Through the three novels, analyzed in the course of this paper: *The Women of Brewster Place*, *Linden Hills*, and *The Men of Brewster Place*, Naylor employs a set of traditional and non-traditional narrative techniques that reflect and deepen the meanings of the content of these novels. Writing community narratives, Naylor employs a comparatively new technique known as the short-story cycle, or the novel in short stories, which in the total enhances the community experience she depicts in her writings. She also pays attention to narrative aspects such as point of view and setting, and above all characterization. All these narrative techniques support the content of her novels in terms of the appropriateness of the form.

Naylor's novels are generally known as short-story cycles. As a matter of fact, her first novel *The Women of Brewster Place* was first published with the remark "a novel in seven stories". Kelley suggests that the precursors of short story cycle dates back to Ovid, five hundred years before Christ, however, it is the advent of Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* in 1980 that drew attention to the form and to writers who employ it (296). Naylor's use of the technique gave legitimacy to other writers who followed her, among whom the technique has become popular. Cox argues that "we can interpret the growing popularity of the story cycle . . . as a response to the changing face of communities, first in the move from rural

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(\*) Lecturer of English literature, Faculty of Arts, Sohag University.

to urban ways of life, and then into a modern world increasingly fractured by its social political, and technological transmutations” (3). This credits Naylor’s use of the technique as in her novels there is always a sense of nostalgia to rural communities as contrasted with urban ones.

What Margot Kelley calls ‘*novels-in-stories*’, is generally termed ‘short story cycle’.

The term “short story cycle” implies, above all, a principle of organization, a structural scheme for the working out of an idea, characters, or themes, even a circular disposition in which constituent narratives are simultaneously independent and interdependent . . . the collection [the cycle of short stories] must assert the individuality and independence of each of the component parts while creating a necessary independence that emphasizes the wholeness and essential unity of the work . . . While each story has its own static and dynamic structures, connective patterns on all levels draw these together to form a cycle of , and the stories are strengthened by varying types of internal cohesion (Davis 4-5)

A short story cycle is a continuum of interdependent and interconnected stories, rather than a collection of short stories. Different stories build toward a development of one plot, and possibly one theme. Each story is quite independent, but is also quite dependent on the other stories within the same cycle. Each story enriches the others, and is enriched by them. Although the individuality of each story is stressed, the unity and integrity with the whole is inevitable. That is why such a narrative technique is quite compatible with narrative of community, and with ethnic literature in general, where the individuality of characters is stressed, however from a unifying communal

perspective that brings them together. Karen Castellucci Cox ascribes the emergence and rapid transformation of the short story cycle to the nature of a changing world that leads to anxieties about the meaning of “community” in the modern world (2). While it highlights the individuality of a community member or minority, it can still foreground possibilities of integration within and without the group.

According to Zagarell, narratives of community tend to be episodic, and that the general plot development or the particular sequence of episodes is far less important than the episodes’ repeated exemplification of the dynamics that maintain the community (520). Narrative action revolves around those dynamics, and hence its episodic characteristic is permanent. Naylor, because she writes narrative of community, resorts to the form of ‘short story cycle’ or the form of the novel written as a collection or a continuum of short stories, as the short story cycle “creates a sense of community amongst characters within the narrative” (Cox 2). In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, she admits that her novels are episodic: “*The Women of Brewster Place*, was interconnected short stories . . . If you go into the form [of *Linden Hills*] and take it apart, there's nothing but interconnected lives” (181). *The Men of Brewster Place* has the same structure of Naylor’s first novel, a novel in seven stories. On the other hand, *Linden Hills* is an odyssey or a journey experienced by two young men who go through successive incidents.

One typical drawback of the short-story cycle is that it tends to be fragmented. A series of interrelated but independent episodes would leave larger gaps among the stories, than those of the chapters of a novel, for example. In Naylor’s cycles, characters tend to disappear by the end of their stories, and they rarely reappear in the text, and

sometimes they suddenly show up on the scene without any prior warning. A series of gaps arise dividing one short story from another, and the reader is required to fill those gaps. This is not new to literature, though, because this is almost the same with a novel, where there are gaps that the reader is required to fill, but in the case of a short-story cycle, the gaps tend to be larger as the independent stories do not build over one another, but rather relate to and reflect one another. What unifies the whole cycle is not the unity of characterization and incidents, but the common theme, and sometimes setting. For example, in the three novels studied, what unifies characters and their stories is the commonality of circumstances as well as goals. Setting is also a unifying means that brings the interconnected stories together to a larger unifying frame and story line. Characters are of different backgrounds, but live together. They don't share most of the incidents but they are lurking in the background as witnesses or spectators, while sharing certain values and conditions with the rest of the characters.

This typical drawback of the short-story cycle is a privilege for a writer like Naylor, who makes use of the technique in more than one fruitful way: in her representation of the black community, Naylor foregrounds the communal possibilities, and at the same time stresses the fragmentation of the shattered lives of her characters. She expresses a state of hyphenation that the black community suffers (i.e. African-American), and the sense of loss that such a state accounts for. They are neither fully African nor recognized as solely Americans. In such a society, fragmentation that emanates from such hyphenation is a dilemma that black people in America have to deal with, on a daily basis. They live together, but does their lives meet or come together at any point? This is

the kind of questions that Naylor asks in her novels, and this is one of the instances where her form meets the needs of her content. The fragmentation of her characters reflects their inner feelings of fragmentation as well.

In Naylor's novels, the lives of her characters do not intersect. There are commonalities regarding their fates, backgrounds, and ends, but their lives do not directly relate, as they are seen late at their lives, when they are making crucial choices. With the exception of *The Women of Brewster Place* where women, at times, try to reach out for one another and have positive impacts on the lives of their female neighbors in Brewster, neither men in *The Men of Brewster Place*, nor the people of *Linden Hills* follow such example of mutual support. Even the women of Brewster Place, though more supportive of one another, their lives do not really intersect. Some of them willfully choose to nurture or support others, but they have their own stories. Naylor's characters share settings, and might have unifying goals, but they are fragmented. This diasporic element is a key aspect of Naylor's fiction. It is symbolic to the final diaspora of the black people who fled the segregation of the south, seeking an Edenic dream of making steady lives in the north, and ended up with just one more diaspora.

Considering Gloria Naylor's novels, they are mainly divided into short stories that reflect a common theme or interest among the interdependent stories/characters. Each character has its own story, which stems from different, albeit similar backgrounds and leads to a common end. Each character is unique, but at the same time reflects the lives of the other characters, in the same cycles. That's why characterization is a major component of Naylor's short-story cycles. Because Naylor is writing short-story cycles

they tend to be episodic. Her novels are character driven; they are mainly about characters who are representatives of the different classes of the black community. In an interview with Charles H. Rowell, Naylor openly states that “Your work must be character driven . . . *character is all for someone like me*” [Italics mine] (182). Her novels are all about character, her incidents evolve around characters, and all her characters are protagonists (i.e. there are very few secondary characters, if any). That is, her characters are fully realized and represented, and they all participate in action. In *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place* sections of the novel are named after the protagonists and every section or unit of the short story cycle mainly focuses on the character it is named after. The same happens in *Linden Hills*: single characters are presented one after another, from the point of view of two young men. The point is that Gloria Naylor’s novels are about and devoted to characters

This can be considered a major contribution of Naylor's in contemporary fiction. Her characters are protagonists, which deviate from the more traditional forms of fiction where there are major and minor characters, heroes and heroines, and events evolve around certain lives/events. On the other hand, Naylor treats all her characters with equality: they're given the same space; they are allowed to speak for themselves, and count towards the development of the story cycle of which they are part. None of them is on the margin, or underrepresented. The most defeated of her characters is given a voice as well as the most powerful; the good and the bad; the blinded and the enlightened; the defined and the blurred, and all the in-betweens. In Naylor's short-story cycles, all characters have voices and make their own choices, and there is always a space for the marginalized,

bringing them to focus. The suppressed is given a voice to share his/her own story, the misled is given a chance to justify his/her deeds, and the good is presented as a model.

The classic distinction between flat and round characters dates back to E. M. Forester in his timeless *Aspects of the Novel*. Forester classifies characters into flat and round where flat characters “are constructed round a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round” (67); characters which can be convincingly surprising are round ones, whereas the lack of surprising and convincing qualities render them flat (78). Regardless of flat character’s failure to realize the complexities of ordinary human beings, Forester finds numerous advantages for introducing flat characters in a text: they can be easily recognized, a writer can use them strikingly without worrying about their development or watching their backgrounds since they are bound to an unchanging status, readers remember them easily and remain eternally frozen and known for one trait, and hence they fulfill a number of comforting qualities for both the writer and the reader (68-9). Such advantages make flat characters not only useful, but also indispensable. However, Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan finds Forester’s dichotomy incomprehensive as well as reductive (42-3). It ignores the levels of depth of characters, and the degrees of development of characters. Above all, Rimmon-Kenan suggests that Forester confuses criteria of simplicity and development, which can coexist. A character can be simple and developing, and vice versa, something Forester’s distinction could not justify, or explain. However, Forester’s classic distinction remains valid and characters can still be seen as flat and round as two poles of a

continuum that allows multiple levels of depth, simplicity/complexity, and development.

Naylor's characters on a flat-round scale would mainly be flat, with few exceptions. They are flat, in the sense they are simple and follow single traits. However, they are not far from complexity or development. For example, the women in *The Women of Brewster Place* hardly do develop, and hence are more of round characters than flat ones. Their mutual support and benevolence help change them into more positive characters. Each in her story, achieves a level of development and enlightenment that renders her a different new person. Eventually they are able to face their realities and challenge them in an attempt to defeat them, which is realized in "The Block Party" section, where they rise to dismantle the wall. On the other hand the men in *The Men of Brewster Place* remain unchanged and undeveloped. They achieve different levels of complexity, having different backgrounds, but they all remain the same. The same can be said of characters in *Linden Hills*, they are of different complexities, but they don't change, with the exception of Willa Nedeed, who achieves a level of development by revolting against the manipulation of her husband and frees herself from her imprisonment.

That is to say the roundness of Naylor's characters and the development they achieve are means of change into better more liberated persons. The static flat characters, who remain undeveloped, are the ones who are forgotten and achieve nothing. Only the round characters who are ready to change, are the ones who gain their freedom, liberate themselves, and are able to build a better solid community, not the ones who just dislike but are satisfied with their destinies. The will to change entails change,

although on different levels of depth and progress that Rimmon-Kenan's critique explains. Some characters achieve more or less levels of development: Lorraine in *The Women of Brewster Place* achieves less development than Cora Lee; while both chance, Cora Lee is more successful in adapting to the surrounding conditions than Lorraine who though becomes a more positive partner to Theresa, and seeks acceptance from the community is far less adaptable to life conditions than Cora Lee. On the other hand, Willa Nedeed in *Linden Hills* achieves depths not realized by other characters; locked in her basement she has enough time to reflect on her life and learn from the experiences of her predecessors.

The presence of flat characters that outnumber round ones enhances the theme of the non-changing fate of blacks, who strive for long to change, but one way or another remain in an unchanging condition of submissiveness to the mainstream culture. That is, even when development and positive progress is there, it is limited to certain individuals and slow in motion. Fewer characters develop, and their development is static in nature. Progress is a far-fetched possibility. It is also destructive in nature: for example the development of the women of Brewster Place leads to a positive however violent destruction of the wall. Willa Nedeed's positive progress in *Linden Hills* eventually leads to her death. It is mainly an unintended and unplanned progress. It is healthy, but random. It is not fruitful for the larger masses of black people, and remains individual attempts that when successful have a destructive nature to the self, or the other.

Naylor's use of setting too, is quite non-traditional. She takes setting to a level beyond the traditional notion of setting being the physical space where incidents take place. Setting in Naylor's novels is a powerful tool which serves

the theme and content. It usually has an impact on the characters either positively or negatively. It has a unifying or dispersing power. That's a little bit different from having a spiritual atmosphere, in that the setting itself has an effect on the characters, not just reflecting their moods or psyches, it takes part in creating them: "When we see through the eyes of a protagonist (who thereby becomes the 'focalizer'), his or her location becomes the center of experience" (Bridgeman 52).

Space can be limited to function only as a frame of action (i.e. a place where action takes place), but "in many cases, however, space is 'thematized': it becomes an object of presentation itself, for its own sake. Space thus becomes an 'acting place' rather than the place of action." (Bal 136). Setting, in that sense is not merely the deictic aspect of a novel, but rather it is how such setting reflects other aspects of a novel and the way characters interact with such a setting. It goes beyond the geographical and physical limits of a space. "In the story, where space is connected to the characters who 'live' it, the primary aspect of space is the way characters bring their senses to bear on space" (Bal 133-4). So, what matters is the way a spatial frame is perceived by characters. Mieke Bal suggests that space can be visually perceived from the particular perspective of characters (133). So, it is not what a setting is, but rather how the characters perceive of it through their own senses and perceptions, and hence setting as a physical entity takes a totally different dimension as a spiritual force that can be of a high symbolic power.

In narratives, "Objects have spatial status" (Bal 135). In *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place* the wall is an object of such a spatial status. The very existence of the wall at the end of Brewster Place is meant to limit the space, and put an end to the extension

of the community. The wall blocks Brewster Place and symbolically limits the possibilities for everyone in there. The same thing for the cemetery at the foot of Linden Hills. It is not the cemetery, however, that limits the possibilities for the residents of Linden Hills, but it is a permanent reminder of where they are going to end, if they just keep descending the hill towards a more prestigious address and status. The irony is that the closer they get to the cemetery, the better they think they are getting. Linden Hills is dead-end, too.

Bal distinguishes between two different levels of space in terms of thematization and mobility (136). Hence there are, as aforementioned, thematized spaces, and non-thematized or frame spaces. Both can be steadily or dynamically functioning. Static spaces are the ones that contain the whole action, while dynamic ones allow the movement of characters to different locations. Naylor's spaces are thematized, although they are mostly static. In very few instances, flashbacks take action beyond the walls of Brewster Place or Linden Hills, while the major function of flashbacks remains to "fill in the past history of protagonists while avoiding a lengthy introduction or in order to reveal new facts" (Bridgeman 57). "The movement of characters can constitute a transition from one space to another. Often, one space will be the other's opposite. A person is travelling, for instance, from a negative to a positive space [and vice versa]" (Bal 137). This is the case with space transitions in Naylor's novels. It contrasts one space with another, and serves the general goal of accounting for such differences between the different spaces that characters experience.

For example, Mattie Michael's and Ben's movement, in *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place* respectively, from rural spaces to an urban neighborhood, as well as Laurel's movement in *Linden*

*Hills*, all illustrates the communal aspects of a rural setting, against the more harsh reality of living in an urban community. Characters movement in these novels reinforces the value of ancestry, and the importance of the roots. In another occasion, such movement just takes place across the boundary of time alone. That is the space remains steady and static, while the character moves through time only, not in the form of a flashback, but in perceiving the surrounding space or physical frame. Such a movement, although static in terms of space, results in a major change in the character. This is the case with Willa Nedeed of *Linden Hills* who stays locked in her basement, however is able to move in time to perceive the sensations and realities of her ancestors. That's what Theresa Bridgeman terms "a shift in conceptual space from the main storyworld to a sub-world (such as a protagonist's mind)" (62). Such a time movement finally results in a major change of Willa's character that eventually manages to free herself from her husband's control. Thus, Naylor uses thematic steady and dynamic space transitions to serve functions.

Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* is set in self-enclosed communities, which is symbolic of the segregated position of black women, as female, black, and poor; that is, they are locked in dead-end settings due to gender, race, and class matters. On the other hand, when physical contact between characters is missing, spiritual links are lost too. Larry R. Andrews argues that,

Naylor uses a unified physical setting, a spirit of place . . . to provide a communal framework . . . Brewster place offers close physical contact that makes the women's confrontation with each other inescapable and their mutual support compelling. In *Linden Hill*, however, the women are physically isolated in houses

and separated by status distinctions. The possibilities for sisterhood here are less spatial and contemporary than temporal and historical (4).

On the other hand, in *The Men of Brewster Place* the men do share the same physical space, however they are spiritually remote and hence not unified towards one goal. In other words, setting in Naylor's novels is a spirit, or a symbol rather than a physical ground. Physical space in itself is not the unifying power, but it is the spirit which has to do with the will and dedication of the characters to their community.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* the physical setting of the novels works as a unifying power that puts the women together and unifies them to defy the symbolic barrier that minimizes their options in life, namely the wall that blocks the street. The community of women comes together to tear down the wall, that makes Brewster Place a dead-end ghetto, and segregates the community from the rest of the city, and renders it in a physical solitude symbolic to the status of marginalization the people live in the street. The wall is presented in the novel as the barrier that limits the chances of the community, and blocks it from all possibilities. That actually concurs with the view that what brings the women together is not their lack of options. On the contrary, their options are scarcer towards the end of the novel, however they unify against the wall which symbolizes all the oppressive forces that interfere with their lives.

it is the same brick-barrier separating the residents of Brewster Place from the outside world that is crucial to the emergence of a communal spirit among the women. Their concerted effort to

bring down the wall demonstrates that solidarity is possible from a common experience of suffering. Whereas the women may lack power as individuals, their confinement creates the potential for the emergence of a collective force (Uwakweh 130).

That is to say the wall, which is a crucial part of the physical setting of the novel, actually takes part in the action as a symbolic suppressing force, that the women defy.

However, in *The Men of Brewster Place* the physical setting works as a dispersing power that renders the men more lonely and individualistic. It is ironic that the same setting can have different effects on the characters who are residents of the same street, positive on the women, and negative on the men. The same dead-end street fails to bring the men together. What is missing in *The Men of Brewster Place* is not only the physical contact with one another, but the spiritual communication too. “*The Men of Brewster Place* is a novel of men who do not share a common goal, a common dream; each is alone” (Whitt 204). So, although setting in itself can have positive or negative effects on character, it is the characters themselves that can stimulate such effects. The men’s individualistic attitude does not give any chance to the possibilities of physical and spiritual contacts that might have empowered them.

Unlike the women, the men are not able to stand as a community and face the challenges of suffering and solitude. Even the wall, could not bring the men together. This is most prominent in the last section of the novel “The Barbershop”: a setting which is traditionally meant to bring black men together, offering them a space to reciprocate solace and sympathy. The barbershop with

such a strong traditional background, essential to the African American community, is not able to bring the men together over a unified goal, or a common interest. “The Barber Shop” section is a sheer deconstruction of that traditional sight, where men come together to talk, rather than to act. The place is suggested in the novel as the place “where men have a chance to hang out and talk” (MBP 157). Talk in itself is not a virtue that may uplift the community. What the community needs is action, something the men are not capable of, being mostly flat characters as they are. Their solitude and segregation renders them more remote from the real life.

In *Linden Hills* setting is spatio-temporal: on the one hand, the physical setting in which the incidents take place reflect a spiritual atmosphere of individualism; on the other hand, a temporal setting is created where the parallel story of Willa Nedeed takes place. Linden Hills is a hierarchal community locating on a hill plateau, descending in circles, or crescents that eventually end up with the bottom of the hill where the Nedeed dynasty lives, next to a cemetery. The setting is designed in a similar manner to Dante’s *Inferno*, where each circle represents a modern version of the seven deadly sins, with various damned souls living in every crescent. Moore suggests that Naylor’s use of a patriarchal intertext like *Inferno* is meant to “teach us that these western stories, though powerful in the history of ideas, cannot accurately reflect the history of her black characters, cannot tell their stories. When they try to live in the white narrative, they are doomed to failure” (1411).

Linden Hills is hierarchal in the sense that residents are classified from the least to the most damned, and that physically reflects their social and financial status, and how far they are losing their identity: the richer and hence more damned souls tend to live closer to the final drive,

where the top is inhabited by the comparatively poorer, and least damned. There are virtual barrier that separate each drive from the next. The people on the top want to move to the bottom seeking a more prestigious address, which at the same time symbolizes their willingness to sell out more of their identities and eventually their damnation. The design of the setting into separate drives stands for the class division within the black community. Even though all the residents are classified as middle-class black people, they are aware of class divisions inside and outside their community. At the same time, they are aware of class division outside their fancy neighborhood: they don't unify or identify with the poor black neighborhood on the basis of race, but actually discriminate against them on the basis of class. This is suggested as the essence of their damnation, by selling out for wealth and prestige, and willingly erasing their identities in order to acquire better material chances in the broader white society.

Unlike the women and men of Brewster Place who were imprisoned in their dead-end street, the residents of Linden Hills willfully choose to confine themselves in. They imprison themselves to keep others out, and create their own barriers. Linden Hills is a V-shaped slope which is shaped in a similar manner to Dante's *Inferno*: seven descending circular-shaped drives and every drive contains damned souls of certain types that stand for Gloria Naylor's version of the modern seven deadly sins. Every drive works like a barrier that bars communication with the outside world, or the neighboring drive. Thus, the physical setting of the novel helps the people of Linden Hills segregate themselves even more far from their broader community. It creates barriers between them and their close black poor neighborhood, between them and the black community in general, and even among themselves though they live in the same neighborhood. That is, the

physical setting of *Linden Hills*, works in a manner similar to that of *The Men of Brewster Place*, in that it creates an atmosphere of individualism.

In this respect, the setting itself acts as a barrier that segregates the residents of Linden Hills from the rest of the race. The difference between *Linden Hills*, and *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place* is that no wall limits the options or acts as a barrier. However, the people of Linden Hills willfully segregate themselves, not from the white hostile sphere, but from their own people. It is a barrier that the black middle class consciously set to separate themselves from the rest of the black race outside their community, and at the same time integrate and identify with the white culture.

Along with the spatial willful segregation, a spiritual atmosphere of individualism is forced, that enhances the physical individualism of the characters. The streets of Linden Hills are empty, no pedestrians other than Willie and Lester are seen outdoors. Even Willie and Lester's presence in the neighborhood is quite suspicious and neighbors call cops to investigate their presence. The people of Linden Hills are seen together just twice, in a manner reminiscent of "The Block Party" in *The Women of Brewster Place*, however for totally different reasons. The women of Brewster Place gather in "The Block Party" to dismantle the physical and metaphorical wall that limits their options and minimizes their chances. The residents of Linden Hills, however, gather in two occasions.

A dull, dark, and lifeless spiritual atmosphere reinforces such solitude. Permanent fog and frost, throughout the novel, are the source of such gloominess of the spiritual atmosphere. And since it is extremely cold outside, no one is seen in the streets, as if the residents of Linden Hills imprison themselves inside their houses, and the streets are just more barriers between them. Willie and

Lester are treated with suspicion and doubt by everyone they meet in Linden Hills. The only warm house, and hence considered a real home, is the Andersons'; nowhere else in the novel it feels a warm nor a welcoming setting for Willie and Lester. Such coldness is openly admitted when describing the Sinai Baptist church, and the most evil spot in Linden Hills is the coldest: the Nedeeds' house is surrounded by a frozen lake. Thus the physically cold atmosphere reflects the spiritual evilness of the place in the case of the Nedeeds' house, or at least the lack of spirituality and honest worship in the case of the church. Although the physical structure of Linden Hills forces solitude and loneliness over the residents who do not meet or communicate, they come together in certain occasions that prove to be the worst moments of selling their blackness out for the sake of materialistic preferences: the meetings at David Alcott's wedding when he sacrifices his true self, and Lycentia Parker's funeral where they collude against their poor neighborhood. Thus, the physical setting of the novel enforces solitude, which is reinforced by a spiritual atmosphere reflected in the dullness, coldness, and abnormality of the characters.

Such abnormality is fully realized when the people of Linden Hills come together to put an end to Brewster Place, a coalition that is meant to be successful, as eventually Brewster Place ends in annihilation and sending its people away in both *The Women of Brewster Place* and *The Men of Brewster Place*. This is one incident where all the three novels meet at one point, for what the people of *Linden Hills* decide that evening, is what eventually leads to the endings of the other two novels: namely, the death of Brewster Place. Hence, an even stronger bond among the novels is established, and they stand out as more representative for the black community in general, exposing the racial and class conflicts within the black

community itself. The miserable life in Brewster Place is harshly contrasted with the fake luxury of Linden Hills. And the spirituality of both communities is equally compared, and obviously felt in the coldness of the setting and the paleness of characters of Linden Hills as opposed to the relentless efforts of the women, and some men of Brewster Place to hold the community together, whereas in Linden Hills characters collude to force even more deception of themselves, and more racism directed against the black community itself.

Along with the physical setting of *Linden Hills*, another temporal space is created for Willa Nedeed to get connected with her predecessors who eventually provide her with the power needed to restore her lost self, and acquire more power to face the overwhelming satanic figure of her husband, who locked her in a basement as the final episode of a series of erasure processes she had to go through. Locked in the basement, Willa had no connection with an empowering force that might keep her going. In her physical isolation she discovers that she had undergone a long-term isolation, forced upon her by her husband. Her isolation is parallel to the isolation of Linden Hills.

Willa crosses the boundary of time, to regain her erased identity, is paralleled with the erasure of three preceding Nedeed wives. Through the items left by those women, Willa is able to identify with their experiences, being suppressed wives of devilish sadist husbands, just like her. She establishes a temporal bond, across the barrier of time, with the preceding Nedeed women, through the items they left (i.e. letters, diaries, pictures, and clothes). Having that done, she rediscovers herself through the discovery of the lives of those predecessors. So, though she is forced in a physical solitude, a temporal setting is created for her to make the connection possible. In such a manner, Naylor gives a new different dimension

of the concept of setting, and takes it beyond the physical boundaries, successfully. Eventually, Willa is able to regain herself and faces her destiny, have the power to overcome her erasure, get out of the basement, and fights one last time for her self.

Naylor also employs another unique purely African American technique: Jazz technique. Jazz, which originated among the first African slaves, is the most representative expression of black experience, it is much of a social expression meant to give voice to the suppressed black race's pains of loss and diaspora, rather than just an African heritage of rhythms blended with a flavor of Western music. It is an expression of identity and of how black people relate to and interact with one another, see themselves, and understand the world around them. The way blues and jazz work among musicians just reflect the way according to which black people should interact with one another. The interaction of blues singers and jazz musicians is that of individual-group: a solo musician plays his improvised piece of music, within a collective musical frame shared by other musicians who play the same melody with different instruments and styles. So, it is individualistic, but at the same time and indispensably a group action. The single person sings/plays for and within the group, so in a sense it offers the individual the uniqueness of the style, and at the same time the harmony with the rest of the group. Jazz has just the same effect as a representative of social experience: it echoes the experience of the individual, while establishing a collective expression for the whole community or group.

The way Naylor's novels are narrated reflects the very essence of Jazz technique. She employs it to stand for the monophonic and polyphonic quality of the community, in a very similar way the setting works in the novels, and just serves the general framework of a community

narrative. For example, the narrative tone tends to be polyphonic (collective) and/or monophonic (individualistic) at other times. That is to say, the novels work the same way a piece of jazz is played (playing improvised tunes, by different players, repeating specific melodies which serve as the main scheme, but adding more, and hence stressing the individual abilities of the players, and incorporating them within the group and performing as one collective team): i.e. improvised narration that tends to be monophonic in the sense it is stressing the individual as a character, but at other times these individual voices are just instances of a more collective communal voice which brings everybody's story together.

Naylor makes a great use of focalization, which is distinct from narration: "*Narration* is the telling of a story in a way that simultaneously respects the needs and enlists the co-operation of its audience; *focalization* is the submission of (potentially limitless) narrative information to a perspectival filter." (Jahn 94). Naylor's novels are narrated by a third-person narrator, however all of her protagonists serve as focalizers. That is, readers see and perceive narration through the eyes of the characters themselves. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan terms that "third-person centre of consciousness", where the "the centre of consciousness (or 'reflector') is the focalizer, while the user of the third person is the narrator" (75). Naylor's use of such technique resolve immense narrative confusions or misunderstandings: the third-person narrator does not have to narrate everything from his/her perspective, as the characters themselves (focalizers) take part in the narration by focalizing the narration and hence have voice telling their own stories.

Focalization is the more contemporary term that replaces the more traditional one "point of view". Mieke Bal defines Focalization as "the relations between the

elements presented and the vision through which they are presented ... [that is] the relation between the vision and that which is 'seen: perceived" (142). The traditional term "point of view" does not distinguish between vision and perception, or between representation and voice. It is not able to tell who is speaking, or narrating, but does not tell from whose point of view, which is a source of great confusion: it does not "make a distinction between, on the one hand, the vision through which the elements are presented and, on the other, the identity of the voice that is verbalizing that vision ... [or] between those who see and those who speak" (Bal 143). Focalization is more able to do that, as it clearly distinguished between such elements as narration and perception. In other words, it is more able to inform the reader who is narrating, and who is perceiving the action. It resolves issues of who is seeing compared to who is perceiving, hence it is more comprehensive and accurate.

In *The Women of Brewster Place* there is not one single narrative voice. An omniscient third-person narrator narrates all the stories collectively, however through the eyes of the characters themselves, who are nothing but focalizers. The narrator tells the stories, and readers are able to see the inner mind workings of character, hear their voices, and identify with them. Thus, there is a collective voice narrating the stories, which at the same time stresses the individuals as different characters, with different backgrounds, and thoughts. And hence, stressing the value of the novel as a community narrative, which collectively embraces all members of the community, while not erasing their individual identities, and characteristics.

On the other hand, *The Men of Brewster Place* is mostly narrated by Ben, whose soul is resurrected to tell the stories from his own point of view. Ben, as an

omniscient narrator sees everything, who narrates the stories of the frustrated men, and is granted the right to comment, and provide his insights about the lives of those men, who are also focalizers. However, a question of Ben's reliability as a narrator arises here. Rimmon-Kenan finds that "the main sources of unreliability are the narrator's limited knowledge, his personal involvement, and his problematic value scheme [that might conflict with the invisible author's value scheme]" (103). In Ben's case, his personal involvement in narration as a protagonist might account for his unreliability. However, being the oldest inhabitant of Brewster Place grants him a better knowledge of everybody, and hence makes his narration more reliable. On the other hand, his value scheme does not, at any point, conflict with Naylor's values.

In a quite similar manner, the residents of Linden Hills are focalizers. They are not allowed to narrate their own stories, not because they are silenced or hushed voices as they are mainly socially empowered capable men and women, but because they are not reliable narrators, for one reason that Rimmon-Kenan points out: their different value scheme from that of the author (103); their morals and values do not match with the value scheme of the author, or with the values that the novel suggest, hence they will not be reliable as narrators. They are presented as sell outs, who cannot be trusted to narrate, as they tend to twist the facts, and blind themselves to veil the truth they do not want to see. The most obvious example of this is Professor Braithwaite who sets to write the history of Linden Hills from his point of view, and watches carefully the damnation of everybody around him, without moving a finger, claiming that he is doing this for the sake of objectivity. All the characters in Linden Hills are no exception of this rule; they all tend to twist the facts to serve their own materialist purposes. The characters who

deceive themselves into believing their fake objectives are not reliable narrators to tell the truth.

*Linden Hills* is narrated through the eyes of the couple Willie and Lester. Lester lives in Linden Hills, but very early in the novel he admits that he himself keeps living in Linden Hills, and enjoys the facilities made possible by his mother. Lester realizes that if people sell out for positions, he might have sold himself “for a pair of clean socks and a chicken dinner” (LH 59). Also, the ghostly figure of Grandma Tilson, roaming in the background of the novel, enlightens him and protects him from falling in the same trap. Willie however is presented as a more reliable narrator, who unlike Lester critically sees everything from an outsiders’ perspective, and keeps commenting and describing all kinds of strange things he experiences in Linden Hills, and even at times that reflects on him feeling sick, and literally disgusted. Thus *Linden Hills* a “figural narrative,” that is, a third-person narrative in which the storyworld is seen through the eyes of a character” (Jahn 95), namely Willie.

To conclude, Naylor employs a set of narrative techniques to reflect the dominant atmospheres of the novels, and what distinguishes one setting as a community while another is not. In general, she writes community narratives, using the short-story-cycle technique, and the unique purely African American Jazz technique, along with focalization, and setting. All the techniques used credit Naylor’s major trend which is community narratives, and the way novels are narrated, reflects even more their collective, communal, or non-communal nature. Thus Naylor’s novels have forms which serve the content of such novels.

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